

Statement for the Record  
Rep. H. Morgan Griffith (VA-09)  
Committee on Natural Resources – Member Testimony Day  
June 4, 2019

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Bishop, and members of this committee, thank you for allowing me to testify before your committee. I appreciate the opportunity to share some issues that are of great importance to my constituents in the Ninth District of Virginia.

The Ninth District includes large swaths of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests. They are sites of great natural splendor, but federal red tape and bureaucratic inflexibility threaten the ability of my constituents to enjoy them.

The George Washington and Jefferson National Forests include popular recreational locations. Among those are the Pines Campground in Craig County and the Cascades Day Use Area in Giles County. The Forest Service has had trouble maintaining them, alleging resource constraints. But the Forest Service discounts a plentiful resource at hand – volunteers in the surrounding communities willing to contribute to the upkeep of these sites.

My understanding from several sources is that this resource goes untapped because of Forest Service rules, which prohibit volunteers from working on their facilities unless directly supervised by a Forest Service employee. Thus, the maintenance is left undone.

A similar story of bureaucratic short-sightedness can be found at another site in Craig County. The Fenwick Mines Day Use Area is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century iron mine now frequented as a picnic site. The Forest Service has indicated they may close it, claiming maintenance problems and lack of use. The Craig County Administrator has offered to find local people with skills to help fix rooves and take care of other maintenance items.

Further, the picnic shelter is often enjoyed by day users. Picnickers will take advantage of the shelter if it is not in use rather than check in with the Forest Service office. If it is in use, they go elsewhere in the park. Seeing the shelter vacant, they quite reasonably do not bother to call the Forest Service to ask about its availability.

Because the Forest Service only logs visitors who reserve the space ahead of time, the many day-of users are not included in attendance figures, and so the Forest Service now wants to make changes to the site because its records indicate low attendance.

While Forest Service bureaucracy is putting up hurdles to the enjoyment of these popular sites, its Flatwoods Job Corps Civilian Conservation Center has been transferred to the Department of Labor and slated for closure. This site in Coeburn trains local youth in educational, social, and vocational skills and aids in the conservation of the National Forests.

As you can see, federal red tape has Ninth District residents in a bind.

My district has shown that there is an alternative. The Volvo truck plant in Dublin, Virginia produces every Volvo truck sold in North America. The facility needed a new road, but the corporate office in Sweden ruled that it would be cost-prohibitive. The employees at the plant, some

of whom had engineering and farming backgrounds, then stepped up. Building upon an idea from the plant's suggestion box, they organized the construction of the road, bringing in the heavy equipment and laying the surface, all for around \$100,000.

Southwest Virginians were willing to fix this problem, and Volvo's corporate headquarters let them. My constituents value the National Forests, and they are similarly ready to work to fix their problems. I urge this committee to consider policies that let them do so. If they need to sign a waiver of liability to volunteer to maintain and improve Forest Service land, so be it. But the policies of the Forest Service should facilitate care for our land by the people, not impede it.

While I'm here, I would also like to highlight issues within your jurisdiction related to abandoned mine lands and their impact on local communities. We have been successful the past few years on the appropriations side in securing money for a pilot program to reclaim abandoned mine lands in a way that encourages economic development. I urge you all today to work within your jurisdiction to continue these efforts.

Thank you very much for your time and attention and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.